2: Courlander B-6 (1937-1966) 1960 SV3 Haiti SV3

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13. Comments on the Mighty: Political Songs

The African-style song of social criticism has found no worthier subjects than the historic political figures of Haiti. There is no doubt that the African slaves used this art form to express their feelings toward the white masters as they had used it to comment upon the behavior of their own chiefs and fellow tribesmen. The worthy leaders were praised in song; the unworthy were castigated and their sins, failures, and social misdemeanors publicized in folk songs. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, slavery had come to an end in Haiti. The deep democratic sense of human dignity had outlasted the colonial masters and emerged tempered and sharp. The songs of criticism became not only comments upon political figures but campaign propaganda as well. They dwelt upon the accomplishments or faults of the candidates for political office. Friendly songs sought out every virtue, and invented others, in the man or woman being praised. Unfriendly songs lashed out and lacerated or poked biting fun at the subject, not even sparing his physical deformities.

Yet the political songs are more than statements of merit or fault. Cumulatively they are a kind of folk history of Haiti. No political aspirant ever went unsung by his peasant army, or unridiculed by his opponent's followers. The songs the people sang about their heroes and their enemies recall events and details that formal history has forgotten or ignored. The memory of the folk song is powerful and long. Some of the recollections go back more than a century.

History books tell us that in December, 1843, Major Charles Hérard aîné Rivière was elected to the office of the presidency, and that a new constitution was drawn up by the Constituent Assembly. The new constitution was an accomplishment of the liberal and democratic forces of the nation. It guaranteed certain civil rights to the people. It provided that judges be elected instead of appointed, abolished life terms for

2: Courlander B-5 (1937-1965) 1960 SV3 Haiti SV3

From Colonel Déro to Private Diplaro,
They marched with fanfare, a great army of foot soldiers!
He thought that he was king!
He thought that he was king!
He thought that he was king!
The Spaniards chased him, he ran like a dog after fresh carrion!

Forty-five years later, in 1888, there was a big political rally in Port-au-Prince. The two presidential candidates were General Séide Télémaque and Déus Légitime. Their supporters clashed near the palace, and Télémaque was killed in an exchange of gunfire. Légitime naturally was accused of having murdered his rival, though his supporters would not believe that he had committed such a crime. Evidence for a trial was entirely lacking, and Déus Légitime became president. But feeling ran high, and the followers of Télémaque began to sing:

Écoutez chers amis l'histoire de Légitime!
Assassin de Séide, et lui est président!
Écoutez bien l'histoire, le gens du nord marchaient
Sur Port-au-Prince un fois pou' vengé la mort de Séide!
Allez au diable, bandit Déus!
Échappez vous, ingrat Déus!
Si vous perdre le temps, Déus,
Florvil vous fcura fusillé!

Listen my friends to the story of Légitime!
Assassin of Séide, and he is President!
Listen well to the story, the people of the north will march
On Port-au-Prince one day to avenge the death of Séide!
Go to the devil, bandit Déus!
Escape, ingrate Déus!
If you lose time, Déus,
Florvil will have you shot!

Légitime had this possibility clearly in his mind. And the next year, when Florvil Gélin Hippolyte marched from the north with an army of *cacos* (peasant troops who hired out to political aspirants), Légitime hurriedly boarded a steamer in the harbor and sailed for Jamaica. Séide Télémaque was considered avenged, as the army bugles still bear witness. For now when the bugle plays reveille it is supposed to be saying:

Séide Télémaque, Légitime has fled!
Séide Télémaque, Légitime has fled!

The new President, Florvil Hippolyte, died in office in 1896. J. N. Leger, a Haitian historian, tells soberly of Hippolyte's end in the following words.

3: Leyburn Z-4, 5 (no date) 1966
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Pétion and Boyer had

suavity enough to rule constitutionally with a Senate which, since class interests were being served by the executive, did not curb their virtual dictatorships. Later presidents had more difficulty. Geffrard, for example, elected as a Liberal after the fall of Soulouque's grim empire, had made parliamentary government a battle cry of his campaign. In office, however, he was continually at loggerheads with his Senate, until he exercised his presidential privilege of dissolving it; in the end a revolution overthrew the Liberal parliamentarian because he had become a dictator. So with his successor Salnave (1867–69), likewise a Liberal, who almost immediately upon inauguration found it impossible to work with such a group of talkers. So once more with Nissage-Saget (1870–74), who followed Salnave: a professed believer in legislative responsibility, he refused to yield to the legislature on any important matter. A black Nationalist succeeded for two years, ruling despotically. Then came the last of the Liberal presidents, Boisrond-Canal (1876–79). This man was apparently determined to allow his legislature its full constitutional rights. As a result Haiti had more talk in the capital, and less action, than in almost any régime up to that time; then, as Montague says, "convinced that the constitutional régime was a failure, Haiti's most scrupulous president resigned in disgust."[13]

The Liberal party virtually disappeared from the scene in 1883, after two abortive coups by their leader of the moment, Boyer Bazelais. The first occurred in 1879 when the retiring President, Boisrond-Canal, gave Haiti one of her very rare honest elections, resulting in the choice of the Nationalist candidate Salomon. Bazelais and his men forsook their professed principles, rising in arms to seize power. They were suppressed. Four years later when the moment again seemed auspicious Bazelais led another revolution, which the President so effectively crushed that the leader himself was killed. The leaderless Liberals were no longer effective competitors in presidential politics. From that time until the American Occupation, the élite were out of power. One president only during those thirty-five years was a mulatto: Tancrède Auguste, one of the weakest rulers in Haitian history. He died, presumably poisoned, after eight months of office.

The era from 1883 to 1915 was Haiti's worst, politically. Revo-

13. Ludwell L. Montague, *Haiti and the United States, 1714–1938* (Durham, 1940), p. 18.

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175 665 208 648 whites patrolling the streets seems to have given reality to criticism which before then would have been academic. The élite were back again in the political forum. Unreflecting patriotism urged the immediate withdrawal of the Marines, but a considerable number of the legislature saw that it would be years before they left. The problem, then, they saw variously: some wished to be eloquent spokesmen for the patriotic anti-whites and did their best to embarrass the Occupation; some, feeling that the Americans were benefiting the country, tried to make things move smoothly; while others, seeing a fertile field for gain, tried to ingratiate themselves with the American authorities.

175 643 642 648 662 The twenty years between 1915 and 1934 heard many eloquent, impassioned speeches, not all of them coming to the same conclusions. The élite were divided in most issues raised by the Occupation, so that the old neat dichotomy between élite and army no longer prevailed. The President, Dartiguenave (1915–22), was for the first time since 1879 a Southerner and a mulatto; yet in 1922 when he was a candidate for reëlection it was Southern élite votes which defeated him. Executive, legislature, and judiciary all had just enough power under the Occupation to make subtle manoeuvres, and all three branches of the government displayed a real genius for the political game. They often succeeded in putting the onus of an unpopular act upon the Americans, and in taking the credit for popular measures with which they had had little to do. They prodded and pricked all the weaknesses in the logic of the American State Department. They forced numerous concessions. If at times they seem to have been overclever, playing the game of politics merely for an opportunity to display their skill, at other times many of them showed a deep understanding of realities which had to be faced.

175 648 666 642 The Occupation, ordered by that high prophet of democracy, Woodrow Wilson, professed its determination to give Haiti her first opportunity to be democratic. Yet the Marines really dictated the choice both of Dartiguenave in 1915 and of Borno in 1922 and 1926. The constitution of 1918 was prepared in Washington; it was submitted to a plebiscite, but the farcical vote—69,337 for and 335 against—was clearly the result of electioneering by the Marines. The presidents of Haiti ruled with executive councils, subject to Ameri-

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can "advice and approval," rather than with the legislature subject to popular control. Even under such restrictions the politically minded found ways of exerting pressure on the Marine authorities.

Out of the darkest days of military subjection by a foreign power came a changed order of politics in the country. The practically unbroken line of dull incompetents who had come into the presidency ended; instead of ignorant army leaders, educated men were once more in office; instead of Northern Negroes, élites of Port-au-Prince; instead of benighted martinets bewildered by world affairs, men who, if not great statesmen, at least had minds capable of understanding Haiti's relation to international economics and politics.

The élite were back in power. In the mind of every friend of Haiti arose the question whether the events between 1879 and 1915 had taught them lessons which would make their return to responsibility productive of great things for the country. Because of the abnormal situation resulting from the Occupation, the world depression, and the briefness of their new ascendancy, one cannot yet speak with assurance. Nevertheless, there are few encouraging signs. Political office is still regarded by most candidates in terms of their own advancement rather than service to Haiti. Very little has been done to extend the base of voting by developing local responsibility and education among the masses. Élite youths still receive a classical education, still disdain manual labor, still cherish the ideal of a graceful life of ease. The president still rules as an autocrat supported by the gendarmerie—substitute for the army of former days. One can see no decrease in social distinctions or in the disdain of the élite for peasant people; on the contrary, there has even been an increase of this feeling because the Occupation (through its Agricultural Service particularly) seemed to open paths of development to the peasants. Social antagonism, not social responsibility, still underlies political life.[20]

To every one of these strictures there is a plausible reply. It is no light matter to unsettle the minds of nine tenths of a population by education, to cause an economic revolution by improving agricultural techniques, to admit to political life a people unaccustomed to

20. Dr. Jean Price-Mars, in *La Vocation de l'élite* (Port-au-Prince, 1919), *passim*, especially pp. 51 ff., urges the élite to accept their responsibilities rather than rest upon the debilitating assurance of their innate superiority.

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3. The unimportance of the legislature. It has made useful patronage for the president to dispense, and has preserved the semblance of republican government; but hardly half a dozen legislative sessions in all Haitian history have contributed seminal ideas in politics or initiated true reforms. How could they, indeed, when the president was consistently a dictator of policy?

4. The undemocratic nature of the vote. Senators are chosen by the representatives, and the two groups together have generally elected the president, when he did not come to power by revolution. The only chance people have had to vote has been for local officials and representatives. In these cases, the vote has been limited to the élite and the army, with the president's henchmen counting the ballots. Since the Occupation there have been plebiscites on constitutional changes, the people having the right to vote Yes or No.

5. The subservience of the courts to the president. They have been filled with president's men, generally astute enough to consult presidential wishes before handing down a decision. Foreign merchants soon learned that they could expect little "justice" from the courts if their own cause conflicted with special Haitian interests. Foreign diplomats likewise learned that in crises the courts could involve the simplest issue in such verbal complexity that months of patience would be necessary to unwind the red tape.

6. The pliability of "constitutional rights." Freedom of speech and of the press has been notably lacking, although scurrilous attacks on the administration's enemies have often been permitted. Legislators have been expelled. Graft has flourished. In 1833, for example, two representatives were expelled from the House "for systematically opposing the measures of the executive, and persisting in a demand for a statement of public expenditures." A century later a senator was expelled for almost the same reasons.

7. Militarism. Only in this respect is any real change apparent since the American Occupation. The army was always large up to 1915, and so constituted an economic drain as well as a political menace. Generals had great power: they ruled each department and each arrondissement, were subject only to the president, and were at the bottom of every revolutionary movement.[22] Since the Occupation

22. In 1842, when the population was still less than a million, there were in the district governments 9 generals, 63 colonels, 48 lieutenant colonels, 9 captains, 1 lieutenant, and 28 medical officers; and in the standing army 33 colonels, 95 lieutenant colonels, 825 captains, 654 lieutenants, 577 sublieutenants and ensigns, 6,815 noncommissioned officers, and 25 medical officers. The army had 28,000 soldiers and cost about $600,000 a year. See John Candler, *Brief Notices of Hayti*, pp. 86 ff.

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priations of supplies to the branches of government; the Senate did not initiate legislation. In so far as the Senate checked the president, this check consisted in the body's being in permanent session. A vacation might be voted, but even during this period a resident committee was in the capital, so that attention to presidential actions might always be called by a senator's speeches; and the Senate could reconvene suddenly at will.

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The Chamber of Representatives, composed of men of twenty-five and over, was chosen every five years by the "electoral colleges" of the communes—men elected by the leading citizens of the commune. No law is effective "whose draft has not been proposed by the executive, discussed and adopted by the representatives, and decreed by the Senate." It might seem that the phrase, "discussed and adopted by the representatives," would give much power to a Chamber in office for five years; actually the Chamber has rarely proved obstinate, and for good reason. At the expiration of the term of the legislators, the president convokes the communal assemblies to choose new deputies or to reëlect old ones; the army "keeps order" at the election, the Electoral College is hand-picked, and so the president's men have generally been chosen. Their pay has been two hundred dollars a month during the sitting, and a dollar a league for traveling expenses.

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Pétion's constitution of 1816 evolved a masterpiece of deceptive generosity in stating that there should be "universal suffrage—except for women, criminals, idiots, and menials—by ballot." Although the group of criminals and idiots might be small, women were more than half the population, and "menials" was interpreted to mean not only house servants but also peasants; in other words, there was "universal suffrage" of about three per cent of the population at the outside. The élite and the army were the only potential voters. Since the elections were held under the watchful eye of the soldiers, and the ballots counted by presidential appointees, there was often extraordinary unity of public opinion.

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The judicial branch of the national government, as distinct from the juge de paix of the commune and the courts in the important towns, existed in part only on paper. There was generally a provision in the constitution, for example, for a High Court of Justice, which should have jurisdiction in all charges preferred by the legislative bodies against their own members, against the president of the re-